
Cover Story

The Future of the Workforce in Illinois



John Rico's Story: Think about the Future

Rico's signature objective for connecting education and work was apparent in a recent discussion with truck drivers, who expressed their concerns about the future. As commercial trucks are being designed for autonomous driving, they worry, "What will we do?" Rico asked them to think about the situation. "If a driver is not in the driver's seat, who will keep the trucks running? Who will respond to the dashboard diagnostic alerts, shutdowns, and emergency situations?" Rico continued, "The best people to deal with driver-less trucks are the truck drivers." He asked them to consider the trends and future with autonomous driving. "New careers will emerge for inspectors, technicians, computer specialists, and more."



John Rico, the CEO of [Rico Computer Enterprises](#), is co-chair of the Illinois Workforce Innovation Board and newly elected chair of the National Association of State Workforce Board Chairs.

John Rico, an Illinois CEO and policymaker, has an upbeat philosophy about individuals and organizations working together. Rico's experiences as a student, then working in manufacturing and developing his company, demonstrate a high regard for the connections between education and work. "As a business owner, I believe that education and the workforce are joined at the hip." Rico's views and experiences provide a vision of the future for the Illinois workforce.

Rico is the co-chair of the Illinois Workforce Investment Board (IWIB), a statewide board that is mandated by the U.S. Dept. of Labor and includes leaders from business, industry, state agencies, education, labor and community-based organizations appointed by the Governor. Their charge is to evaluate and meet the workforce needs of Illinois' employers and workers.

The IWIB just finished a Strategic Plan for 2018-2020, which highlights partnerships and civic engagement. Rico applauds the dedication by task force members for hours and hours of discussion to final submission and approval. "Their good work serving the citizens of Illinois made my role as chair easy and uncomplicated. Our greatest reward is knowing that the 2018-2020 Strategic Plan will strengthen the partnerships between education and the workforce in Illinois and contribute to all generations."

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Family Traditions as Volunteers

Rico's view about education and work was shaped by his family's tradition of volunteer service and the belief that all family members had an important role in helping the family flourish. Everyone had to help. John had a paper route and was responsible for some of the everyday duties as a member of a large family. His mother encouraged music so the nine brothers had a family band. Rico played saxophone and says with a gleam in his eye, "playing music together may have kept us off the streets."

Rico tells about an experience in eighth grade that may have resulted in his first executive decision. John joined the Safety Patrol Boys at the Jonathan Burr Elementary School in Chicago. Their main function was to help younger students cross the streets safely. As captain, Rico said that his leadership was soon tested when one of the eighth-grade girls asked if she could be a member of the safety patrol. After some discussion, Rico, as the leader of the group, decided to recommend the change. Later, other schools followed that example, as girls joined safety patrols throughout Chicago Public Schools.

Service came naturally to the Rico family. John recalls that he and family members volunteered for the Chicago Marathon during the administration of Mayor Jane Byrne. "My brother Tony was the lead organizer and all my brothers and sisters took a position on the running route. I was posted at the Planetarium." At the time the Azteca Running Club was the largest in Chicago and later became the Chicago Runners Association that exists today. As a result,



This fuzzy 1969 photo shows the Burr Elementary School Safety Patrol. The Captain of Patrols is John Rico, front row third from the left.

Rico became a runner and participated in several Marathons.

Years later in college, he found another opportunity for service and leadership, first at Northern Illinois University (NIU) where he started his college career, and then at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC). Latino students wanted a house or center where they could congregate and share their culture. The students had submitted application after application with no success. John said, "If you want a well-written document, often the source for that is an English teacher." He went to a faculty member in the English department and told him about their goal. "The professor helped me write a good proposal and the center at NIU was approved." Later when he transferred to UIC they followed the same process and a center was also approved.



John Rico discovered his love for running after he volunteered for the 10th Chicago Marathon. The Rico family helped runners and sponsors at sites along the way.



The CEO, John Rico, shows a RICO computer in 1988. Note the 5" floppy drive. The photo was taken during a surprise visit from the Small Business Administration. Rico recalls thinking that "something was wrong and we were not prepared for them to come to our office." At the end of the day they wanted to know more about how small businesses were merging, then requested a photo. "All turned out well. In business life you expect the unexpected and just be yourself and hope for the best".

Career Path: From Education to Work

After graduating from the University of Illinois at Chicago with a major in business and a minor in music, Rico worked for three different companies, each position expanded his management skills and leadership experience. At American Home Products, he was presented with a dilemma. "At the end of each shift, we would observe how many products were produced," he noted. "However, when we did the quarterly inventory, the numbers of products would never mesh with what was produced." So Rico spent two years computerizing the process. When finished, the computers showed exactly how many products were produced per hour. The project earned Rico a position in *Who's Who* in the Computer Industry as "First to Integrate Computers into Manufacturing" (1985). Rico also invented a computerized bar code printer to print the codes onto packages, jars and bottles that further updated manufacturing processes.

"After that successful project, I knew that working for a Fortune 500 company might be my career path but I also wanted to start my own company." He came to the conclusion, "If I don't try, that may haunt me for the rest of my life." Rico said that he understood the challenges. "Starting a company is a daunting task and a little scary."

As he recalls the history of his company, Rico credits the people who supported him and believed he could succeed, including his wife, Guadalupe, brothers, and other family members. Clearly it was a cross-generational effort. He describes the beginning: "I had property with three buildings on it, our home, a cottage and a big shed, which became the office and warehouse. That is where we started the company in 1985.

"One of my main reasons to be self employed was to watch my children grow up. My oldest son, John and daughter, Vicky, grew up learning all about computers, math, spelling, software, stories and playing games." In 1986, one year after the business began. Rico was still at the development stage to make the perfect PC. Later, one of Rico Enterprises' first orders was 2,000 computers for Chicago Public Schools.

Learn and Earn

Another noteworthy event in the early years of Rico Enterprises was a contract to computerize the deeds in Cook County, which were on microfilm. There were over 80 million documents that originated between 1985 and 1997, so when someone wanted to get access to a deed in Cook County, it took forever. Rico had an idea about learning and

earning that could combine education and workforce skills for the Cook County contract. He involved students from Chicago Public Schools, many were considered at-risk. He trained them with the technical skills to transform the microfiche to computer images. They completed the two-year contract in nine months. In the process, students had a chance to learn, earn a little money, and develop good work habits.

"If I don't try, that may haunt me for the rest of my life."



Rico children, Victoria, age 5 and John Jr., age 8, enjoying the Rico computer in 1986, a year after Rico started his company. This photo was taken in the shed, which became Rico's small warehouse and office. The first RICO Computers were built in this building.

"One of my main reasons to be self employed was to watch my children grow up."



Rico and one of his students working on the Cook County contract to transform microfiche deeds to computer data.

Rico underlines the importance of a good work ethic. "The soft skills needed for these jobs include showing up, paying attention, absorbing instructions, asking questions and getting help when something goes wrong. 'I knew that if the kids made mistakes, it was on me. That was 1999 and some of those kids still call me today, now as CEOs and in leadership positions.' They refer to the experience with Rico Enterprises as the beginning of their career paths. That experience with students gave Rico an understanding of how students develop skills for their careers and reinforced his belief that education and work are joined at the hip.

Help the Teachers

"My mother, a bilingual teacher in Chicago, gave me some good advice. She said, 'If you do anything in business, try to help the teachers.'" At the time, most teachers weren't experienced with computers and didn't know what to do if something went wrong. Eventually Rico Enterprises formed a partnership with IBM and other computer companies

as a contractor for Chicago Public Schools.

An article in Chemical Bank's *Business 95, Success Strategies for Small Business* acknowledged how Rico Enterprises gained a foothold in the area so dominated by big business. Rico was quoted in the article, "We have educators helping other educators because they know exactly how frustrating it is to be in the classroom and not have the right tools." Rico's wife Guadalupe, who was a teacher, joined the business and as a result, the commitment to teachers became part of the company's mission. Rico Enterprises was already at work in the schools when President Clinton issued America's Technology Literacy Challenge in February 1996. The challenge suggested teacher training, software for learning, access to computers, and connections for every school and classroom to the information superhighway.

In 1996, during a Chicago Public Library event, Bill Gates introduced Rico as a former CPS student and someone empowering people, business and organizations to do great things by building computers and developing education software. In a letter to Rico, Gates wrote that he was impressed by what Rico had accomplished. "I know how many hours of hard work it takes to create a successful company."

The Home and Small Business News featured the Rico Family in 1997.

"The company now has two Chicago sites and sixteen employees, many of whom are John's brothers (and one sister). John, his wife Guadalupe and brother Antonio are full partners in Rico Enterprises today. The original 1985 computer business started with



Rico Computers Enterprises, Inc. was honored in 2000 as an outstanding family-owned business by the Chicago Southland Chamber of Commerce. Rico executives appearing on the cover included: L to R: John Rico, CEO; Guadalupe Rico, vice President; Antonio Rico and Dan Rico. The photo was also featured during the 25th anniversary of Rico Enterprises.



Chemical Bank's 1995 cover described Rico Enterprises as one of the fastest growing minority IT and small businesses in the nation.

family members, and some are still there. And of course, now that his children have completed college, they are rising stars in the business.” Rico says that before he involved his children in the business, they spent at least five years working for another company.

Continuity and the Generations

From the very beginning of Rico’s life, the generations were supportive and involved. According to the *Hispanic Quarterly* in a 2009 article, “At first his family watched from the sidelines, then they began to get involved.” Rico shared his secret about success, “If you’re able to clone yourself, you’ll be able to get more things done,” says Rico. “Well, my secret is that I have nine brothers.”

Rico is open and honest about the challenges of involving the generations, “I’m not saying mistakes don’t happen and that we agree on everything.” Now the kids are making innovative additions to the company. One son, Joe is exploring some of the connections with technology and music as a demo audio engineer for Fort Knox. Rico said that he considers this “entertainment to careers.” Daughter Victoria is the Financial Officer and offers professional development courses related to cyber security, one called Raspberry Pi. The Raspberry Pi is a tiny and affordable computer that can be used to learn programming. The goal of these sessions is to help teachers become more aware so they can increase students’ interest in technology and creative problem-solving through fun and practical projects.

John Rico Jr. is charge of operations and manager at the Airports’ WiFi



Raspberry Pi

Above: Victoria Rico Barrios hands a trophy to an award winner participating in the Raspberry Pi competition.

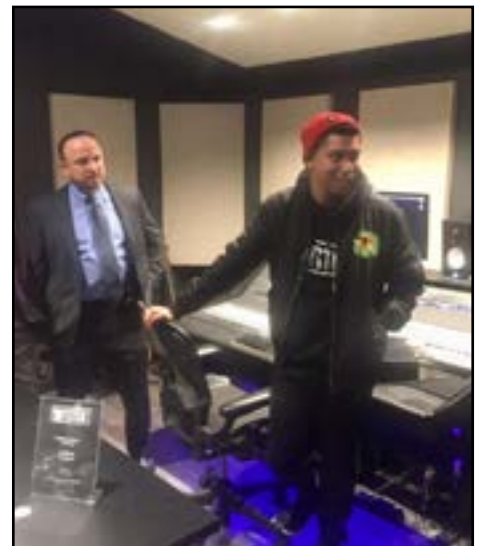
Below: A student demonstrates in-house protection and security.



contract that Rico Enterprises has operated for the last 12 years. He also installs and provides service with his crew for the Big Belly solar trash compactors you see in Chicago and in many states. Antonio Rico, an older brother, is a partner and secures the contracts. He is beginning to enjoy the transition into retirement.

Strengthening Connections between Education and Work

In the early 1990’s, Rico Enterprises became a member of the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce. One of Rico’s first business volunteer opportunities was with the Chamber’s Youth Motivation Program



The Dec. 2017 IWIB board meeting was held in Chicago at the Fort Knox Studios. Joseph Rico, an audio engineer demonstrated a variety of ideas called music to careers.

L to R: Jon Furr, NIU and Joseph Rico.

“As board members, we recruited other business people from different sectors to talk with students about their careers.” Rico said that he hadn’t participated in many formal boards until Peggy Luce, a vice president at the Chicagoland Chamber saw his potential and invited him to share his expertise with local and statewide organizations. Rico said that he remembers Peggy’s invitation and her persistence. “She said, ‘You would be perfect for the Private Industry Council.’ She tried for a year or two and finally I agreed to participate.” Rico said, “I never intentionally set out to become a leader chairing boards, councils and committees. It just happened. I think it happened because I listened to and watched behaviors of good leaders.”

Many years later, as the chair of the College and Career Readiness Committee in the P-20 Council, Rico had the opportunity to establish a cutting edge policy supporting Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness.



Giving Back: The neighborhood fun run at Douglas Park raised funds for A Safe Haven, a project for the homeless, which is a great giving organization.

L to R: Jesus "Chuy" Garcia and John Rico

Preparing for the Future

Rico recalls his experience running a marathon as a touchstone for the workforce of the future. "You train and prepare for the physical part of running a marathon, but the mental preparation is what determines success in the last miles. When nearing the end, it is so easy to say, 'I quit! I'm done!' But then you draw on inner strength and continue." Rico suggests that like running a marathon depends on individual perseverance, of believing that success is possible. Rico says that in a marathon, the most important person is you. You have to believe in yourself. Find success within yourself. The recent completion of the Strategic Plan for the Workforce might be compared to running a marathon. Task force members asked one another, "Do we agree on the goals? If no, they kept looking until they found the support among their members that reflected a good compromise." Clearly the process resulted in stronger partnerships between education and work. Rico commends the dedication by all involved in completing the Strategic Plan from task force

Civic Engagement in Service, Learning and Work Statewide Appointments

In 1993, John Rico was appointed to the Private Industry Council of Suburban Cook County (PIC) by Cook County Board President Richard Phelan. Rico had been recognized among the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce members as an emerging private sector leader in technology, business development and job creation. The Chamber was responsible for nominating business leaders to serve on the PIC to establish policy for the operations of the Cook County President's Office of Employee Training (POET) that administered federally funded workforce services to south and west suburban Cook County.

Rico took his volunteer responsibility seriously by quickly learning how the federal, state and local requirements of the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) were implemented and saw that improvements were needed to move isolated organizations with overlapping responsibilities away from silo approaches and into coordinated alignment.

When Governor Jim Edgar replaced the statewide Illinois Job Training Coordinating Council in 1996 with the 33-member Human Resource Investment Council to recommend policies for both federal and state programs on workforce preparation, Rico accepted the governor's call to serve.

Future governors recognized Rico's non-partisan dedication to improving Illinois' education and workforce preparation policies and programs with continued appointments. Today, Rico is the co-chair of the Illinois Workforce Innovation Board (IWIB) guiding the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity

Act (WIOA) in Illinois. In 2009, Governor Pat Quinn included John Rico among his 25 appointments to the new P-20 Council, a key education advisory panel for preschool through graduate school and from birth through adulthood. The Council played a role in Illinois' quest to win federal Race to the Top education money. Now P-20 works to create a seamless education system with smooth transition points to maximize all students' educational attainment, opportunities for success in the workforce, and contributions to their local communities. Since its inception, Rico has chaired the P-20 College and Career Readiness Committee that makes actionable recommendations on what skills, systems, resources, and alignment efforts are required for all Illinois residents to be college and career ready in an innovative and globally competitive society.

Upon Governor Rauner's January 2015 inauguration, Rico wrote to him about the interdependence of education and workforce initiatives. "The IWIB supports utilizing federal workforce training dollars to fund public/private initiatives with employers, local associations, economic development entities, and community colleges that create sector-based models, develop career pathways, and customize training solutions for a skilled workforce, including special populations such as people with disabilities, veterans, and youth. This experience has taught us that creating employment solutions in collaboration with business-led boards, economic development and industry partnerships is the best approach. Now is the time to increase those solutions by tying them to approaches in talent pipeline management."

stage to submission and approval. "It made my participation easier and uncomplicated."

Last, milestones, like the Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness Act, are reached when people understand public policy and realize they have

a common goal. The future of the workforce in Illinois challenges us to respond with education and training that prepares students for the careers of today and tomorrow.



Left: During the Illinois Workforce Innovation Board meeting on Dec 14, 2017, Wendell Dallas gave insights about how the Georgia board works, their target services and many tips about how to be a better board member. The Fort Knox Studio in Chicago hosted the meeting.

L to R: Margi Schiemann, IWIB board member and director, Infrastructure Programs & Support, Nicor Gas, Naperville Illinois; Wendell Dallas, chair of the Georgia Workforce Board and Vice President, Operations, Atlanta Gas Light and Chattanooga Gas and guest speaker; John Rico, CEO, Rico Enterprises; Sean McCarthy, executive director, Illinois Dept. of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO); and Julio Rodriguez, deputy director Office of Employment and Training, DCEO.

“Giving back is my main objective and without a political agenda.”

Chair of the National Association of State Workforce Board Chairs

John Rico talks about his experiences in Washington and the motivation to get involved, “Giving back is my main objective,” he said, “and without a political agenda.” He continued, “It is a privilege to be chair of the IWIB, and a great honor from my national workforce colleagues to chair the NGA National State Chairs Workforce Board Winter Summit.”

“During our discussions in Washington, there was a consensus that we should be open to new ideas, new ways of focusing and to represent all people in all states. I promised my fellow chairs that I would give the same dedication to being the state workforce board chair as I do for my own state of Illinois. I am grateful to my colleagues for joining me in making this winter summit one of the best. I can’t wait for the second meeting.”

About the National Association of State Workforce Board Chairs

The National Association is a membership organization; the Association is an affiliate of the NGA Center for Best Practices, which performs the secretariat role. Members of the Association are chairs of gubernatorial-appointed state workforce boards (SWIB), which are responsible for overseeing state workforce development systems.

The association provides a unified voice for state workforce boards on national policy issues, with a focus on strengthening the nation’s employment, training and education systems and on collaborating with other national organizations engaged in areas of common interest.

The 2018 Executive Committee:
 Laura Beeth, Association Vice Chair (Chair, Minnesota SWIB);
 Paul Perkins, Association Immediate Past President (Chair, Indiana, SWIB);
 Ken Madden (Chair, Oregon SWIB);
 Dawn Grove (Chair, Arizona SWIB);
 Wendell Dallas (Chair, Georgia SWIB);
 Eleni Papadakos, Ex-officio Member; (Executive Director, Washington SWIB) and
 Chair, John Rico (Chair, Illinois SWIB).



The cover story, The Future of the Workforce in Illinois was prepared by Peggy Luce, Luce Consulting and Jane Angelis, editor, Continuance Magazine, through numerous interviews with John Rico, members of the IWIB, and education and work partnerships throughout Illinois. Information about the National Chairs was provided by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices. Thanks all for helping us tell this wonderful story.